

CULTURE SHIFTERS: ARTISTS MAKING CHANGE



FERN SMITH
2016



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government



Cyngor Celfyddydau Cymru
Arts Council of Wales

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INTRODUCTION



I am an artist. I've always been interested in how artists and the arts can be major catalysts for change whether that be personal, social or planetary. We are at a major crossroads in the history of man and the planet. This fact has been repeated so often that it almost seems commonplace. But there's a difference between knowing it and really 'knowing it' and then acting on this knowledge.

Now more than ever we can truly say that we live in an interconnected universe. The choices of each of us affect the lives of all of us. Every action we take, individually and collectively, impacts on what kind of world we are creating and what kind of world we will be leaving behind for future generations to inherit. In Wales, we have potentially one of the most radical pieces of legislature since the formation of the Welsh Government: the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act, introduced in 2015. This puts sustainability at the heart of Welsh life and is a vision for improving the

social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales. Its aim is to ensure that the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

The phrase 'business as usual is no longer an option' is one which I've heard repeated many times in the past five years by scientists, energy specialists, environmentalists and activists. It's one of those phrases that can keep you awake at night. It can be read as a warning, a provocation but also as an invitation to be participants in the greatest adventure story our time...the creation of a planet which values and sustains life – of all kinds.

Art has a major role in helping achieve this. Engaging seriously with the imagination is a radical act. Suzi Gablik is an arts commentator who has been a major influence for many artists working in the area of 'socially engaged practice'. She asks what a 'successful' artist looks like at a time of social and ecological change. The old ways of defining success are being questioned. More artists are bringing their practice into the social realm.

Art makes change. It accompanies, communicates and documents it and thereby creates more change. During this transitional time, art is not a luxury, or an 'add on', it is a necessity. It has a crucial role in imagining the kind of world we want to live in and helping bring it into being. The case for the arts and its importance in the creation of a sustainable future has been made in depth in the document 'Culture

Shift'. This document 'Culture Shifters: Artists Making Change' tells three stories of how artists in different parts of Wales are leading on regeneration, sustainability and social activism. It is a response to an invitation from the Arts Council of Wales to document arts development projects where creativity has been used to generate broader societal change impacts in line with the work of the Enterprise and Regeneration Team. Sian Tomos, Director of Enterprise and Regeneration, says: "we want to use these case studies to raise interest in and enthusiasm for the role of artists in promoting social change."

The three case studies chosen are representative of the kinds of socially engaged projects being undertaken by artists working in Wales and further afield. They are 'Mr & Mrs Clark's Smash It Up' 'Oriel Wrecsam & The Shepherd's Hut Project' and 'Vetch Veg'.

Throughout Spring 2016, a selection of people involved in each of the art projects were interviewed. In order to tell each story in as direct and immediate a way as possible, I have assembled verbatim transcripts of each of the interviews. Further resources and reading, including websites of the projects and artists involved, can be found at the back.

**Fern Smith,
Creative Director,
Emergence 2016**

FERN SMITH



Fern has a First Class Degree in Psychology, a Masters in Industrial Relations and twenty-five years experience co-leading Volcano Theatre Company a Revenue Funded Organisation (RFO) of the Arts Council of Wales. After being awarded the Arts Council of Wales Fellowship on the Clore Leadership Programme in 2009, she went on to establish Emergence an arts and sustainability initiative (now a Community Interest Company), curating events, commissioning art and undertaking research that champions the role of the arts in social and ecological change. She is interested in creating conditions for dialogue and transformation. Her private practice as a craniosacral therapist, celebrant and coach underpins this.

www.emergence-uk.org

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MR & MRS CLARK SMASH IT UP



This is the story of pop-up art and empty shops in Newport, the decline of the urban commons and of two performers, Mr & Mrs Clark, finding their voices as art activists. To find out how all this happened, I spoke to Gareth Clark and Marega Palser at Chapter Arts Centre in Cardiff as they were rehearsing to take their show, 'Smash It Up', out on tour.

WHO ARE MR AND MRS CLARK?

Marega Palser is a performance-based artist living in Newport, South Wales. She originally studied at the London School of Contemporary Dance and, after graduating in 1985, went on to work with various theatre companies, as well as being a founder member of the dance theatre group Paradox Shuffle.

Gareth Clark was originally a support worker for young people in Rhondda Cynnon Taff. After an immersion into the world of carnival, drumming and playing live gigs, Marega introduced him to the world of live art and theatre. Since 2001 they have worked together as the performance duo 'Mr & Mrs Clark'.

Gareth: In the work I used to do with young people, I was interested in ideas like how we accept the lot we are given and how we make change. I started applying these ideas to my own life. Our ethos is 'everything is possible'. It's about being brave, bold and nervous all at the same time. Marega was a catalyst for all this. I found myself in situations I never thought I'd be in, with people I never thought I'd be with. There's a great improvisation game called 'Yes, Let's' – this sums up our work and

approach, it's about not saying No! There are no stupid ideas, just ideas.

Marega went on to study fine art at Cardiff School of Art. This led to an interest in fusing performance and mark-making. She was awarded a Creative Wales Award in 2010 which led to a number of solo and collaborative shows including 'Sometimes We Look' which enabled her to develop this work with other dancers.

Marega: I'm interested in how things knock against each other and bringing opposite worlds together. I'm a multi-disciplinary artist in 'art-speak', but I just call myself 'a mover and a shaker'.

Marega and Gareth formed Mr & Mrs Clark as a way of pursuing their shared interests, though they continue to work as solo artists. Their work is gaining increasing attention, at home and abroad, having recently been shortlisted for the Amnesty International Freedom of Expression Award in 2015.

Marega: The context of our role is ever changing - from studio practice, to outdoors, to working with people with theatre or dance experience,

to those with none - we're always asking: "what is the role of this?" "What is the role of us?".

The Clarks are one of the most productive and hard-working companies in Wales. Often, especially in the early days, making work with little or no budget. Their early performances involved irreverence, humour, surreal, and dark imagery but no spoken word. The side-show or the cabaret was a defining factor of their work as was a proximity to the audience, sometimes involving the audience making decisions about the direction of a show (*Nine: 'Two people, nine scenes. What happens next is up to you'*).

Fern: So why is it so important that the audience get involved?

Gareth: I can't stand being lectured at. I want to find my own way. We invite the audience to find out their own way. Central to our work is starting conversations, having a discourse with people. This will only work if you work...Audience participation and empowerment has always been important in our work.



NEWPORT



Beneath The Surface, NIA, image: Jo Haycock

Fern: Can you tell me a little about your move to Newport?

Gareth: Moving away from Cardiff where we'd lived before was important. We first moved to a place outside Newport and then into the centre. We discovered an underground, DIY scene we didn't know about. Then the empty shops came. The centre of Newport was hit hard by the global financial crisis of 2008. In the run up to the Ryder Cup and the Newport clean-up, the city council compulsorily purchased a number of empty shops in order to "do something" about it. The empty shops actually galvanized the arts community. The defiant side of Newport started to reveal itself.

National Theatre Wales were in Newport 2010 with [The Dark Philosophers](#). This became a catalyst for The Clarks future work in Newport as they were 'early adopters' of a now growing trend of using empty shops as art spaces.

Gareth: As part of their 'NTW Assemblies' that accompanied each show, they needed to make a connection with the community so they said to us: "we have an empty space, would you like to do something?"

Later, in an arts project called 'Store', Marega was asked to help 'sell' performances out of an empty shop. She'd never done this before and was interested in how the process worked.

Marega: I was told, "You are the bridge between the street and the art." This really made sense. I asked people if they would

like a performance. "What's a performance?" people would say. We had to reinvestigate our own language.

Gareth: When we asked people in Newport if they wanted to see more art, they said "No!" But after seeing art happenings on a daily basis, the same people would come up and ask when the next event was going to take place.

Marega: People do want to see more positive energy though - they really responded to what we were doing - but 'art' often still feels like a word for other people.

Gareth: John Frost Square was going to be demolished. This was historically a space in Newport for meetings and for demonstrations. We wanted to start a conversation about how people felt about that and what was going to happen to the city centre. I'm interested in doing things in unusual spaces. The Community Arts Development Team in Newport had control over an empty shop called '[Project Space](#)'. We asked if we could do something there.



~~~~~  
"WE HAD TO DO  
SOMETHING PRETTY  
BRAVE, PRETTY  
QUICKLY."  
~~~~~



Beneath The Surface, artist: NIA, image: Jo Haycock

The Occupy Movement is the international branch of the [Occupy Wall Street](#) movement that protests against social and economic inequality around the world, its primary goal being to make the economic and political relations in all societies less vertically hierarchical and more flatly distributed.

Fern: Can you tell me about how being involved with the empty shops influenced your work?

Marega: The empty shops? They are a godsend. If you want social change, give artists a shop front. We met half the population in Newport! People would say I've never seen anything like this. It was all about energy – people's energy. It allows for a release – a relief. There's a brilliant quote by Carrie Reichardt - "Beware of Artists - they mix with all classes of society and are therefore the most dangerous".

One of my favourite empty shop projects was 'Inviting The Neighbours Round to Paint'. This was literally a drawing and painting project. A small budget can stretch a long way. This comes from having a DIY head-space - what can I make with nothing? The shop became a safe haven for everyone who went through the High Street. It wasn't about your public image on the street.

In 2011/12, The Clarks along with other local artists, were involved in producing 'The Meeting' an exhibition, tour and performance in and around Urban Arts Space in John Frost Square, a project run by the community art development officers at Newport Council.

Gareth: The research and development stage of this enabled us to meet lots of people, artists, groups, projects...It led to us making

a performance – also called The Meeting...The whole project was meant to be about 'defiance'. But there was a real reticence from people in Newport to organise or activate – people said "Newport is a shithole" and just seemed to accept it.

We started doing workshops with other artists and with young people. As part of these we started to hear people saying "I wouldn't live anywhere else". There was a pride about the place we'd not heard voiced before. But there was an odd relationship of subservience with the local authority, so we staged an enactment of a kidnapping of a local councillor/private developer, so we could get people to tell them what they wanted to say. So we gaffa-taped this 'councillor' to a chair and they had to listen. But people just said things like: "can we have better parking?" It shocked people that they didn't know what to say, that they couldn't ask for anything else. Then people started to talk more to each other. There were tears. People started to say, "I think I have to do more". It felt like an important door opening. It was like making a bridge.

This was all happening at the same time as the worldwide Occupy Movement which Gareth spoke of as being a significant catalyst for their work taking on a more art activist role.

NEWPORT INTERNATIONAL AIRSPACE (NIA)

Gareth: NIA was a legacy if you like of The Meeting – four artists coming together with a small grant from the Arts Council to create it. We wanted to support ourselves and also other professional artists living and working in Newport. We would come together to share our practice, programme workshops, artwalks and events.

NIA's first project was [*'Encounters Beneath the Surface'*](#) involving curating a programme of talks, walks, screenings and workshops. Again the subject was Newport...

Marega: We took over a building for a month, it was £5 to get in. It was an enormous space. People said they felt like they were in Amsterdam and not Newport! We had a bar, a cinema, performance spaces - we wanted to engage with as many interested people as possible. We did events on immigration and homelessness in the city, child brides, the price of property in Newport. We had five shows going on at the same time.

In order to pursue this interest in more socially engaged art activist practice, in 2014/15 Gareth applied for and received a major Creative Wales award from the Arts Council of Wales.

Gareth: Enormous credit to the Arts Council – they absolutely get it! Creative Wales is a real rarity – no other body has this level of investment in individual artists. As I'm from a non-art/theatre world, it felt important to me in that I saw it as a marker of me becoming or being seen as an artist. It's taken me ten years of making art to be able to finally call myself an artist!

NIA is a group of professional artists who came together through The Meeting. We work collaboratively with others to showcase the talent, space and diversity within and around Newport. The fundamental principal of [NIA](#) is to develop the need and sense of worth, for art and creative practice within the city of Newport, mainly through engaging the public in new and professionally presented ventures – public art installations, exhibitions, performance and sound. We believe that art has the power to not only change the environment that we live in, but that it can also help give people a voice and a feeling of empowerment.



“THE PUBLIC REALM
IS BEING ERODED
BUT WE DON'T SEE
THE BULLDOZER”



SMASH IT UP (SIU)



We Need to have a Plan B'

"Didn't the arts become safe and well behaved during the New Labour years? I think they did. I think they weren't telling the truth – the dirty, dangerous, hilarious, upsetting, disruptive, noisy, beautiful truth – as often as they should have done..."

In short, I think the arts sector as a whole went astray during the last couple of decades. Just as the Titanic was heading towards the iceberg, we were attending seminars and workshops, learning how to facilitate more effective refrigeration in our sector of the cultural industry when we could have been looking through the telescope and plotting an entirely different course. The bankers and the politicians weren't looking ahead to spot the approaching iceberg. But neither were we: we were entertaining the same bankers and politicians at our latest gala, corporate sector friendly, socially inclusive performance evening."

[Mark Ravenhill](#)



Fern: What was the inspiration for Smash It Up?

Gareth: Smash It Up is an olive branch and a rallying cry. It was one of the many outcomes of my Creative Wales year of searching, learning and doing. It was inspired among other things by a speech given by the playwright Mark Ravenhill in 2013 at the Edinburgh Festival, 'We Need to have a Plan B'...

Gareth: I was in New York, rehearsing 'Porno,' a show about finding love in the sex industry. I got a message from Meg that they were about to destroy a historic landmark in Newport – a mural commemorating the Chartist Uprising. I was feeling bad and thinking: "what am I doing here, this is not the kind of work I want to be making"...

Meanwhile, Marega, was involved in demonstrations in Newport town centre. She participated in making a shrine to mark the destruction of the mural which the council immediately dismantled. "Shame on you" was her response.

Gareth: We knew we had to do something. The mural, made by Kenneth Budd in 1978, was significant not just locally but nationally. It represented a crucial marker of the civil rights movement in Britain and it was a key part of Newport's people's history.

The site of the mural and the mural itself ultimately was sacrificed for a new city centre development and the local council felt it's hands were tied. If it wanted the new shopping centre, it had to give way to the private developers and lose the

mural. It felt like a tough choice between Newport's historic past and the supposed future regeneration of the city. Initially it sounded as if the mural was to be incorporated into the new development. This became no longer an option. A campaign group was formed and tried to stop it happening. Smash It Up was about the story of the mural – a local story but one that resonates with events and choices the world over. The mural is now in landfill. This was a clear statement and challenge to us as artists. We had to do something pretty brave, pretty quickly.

SIU, united two parts of Newport's art scene – Bosch, an avant garde underground film duo, and The Clarks with our performance background. [André Stitt](#) was the mentor for the project so we could learn more about performance in public spaces. A theatre development grant supported the early stages of the exploration...

Marega: SIU was influenced by our previous empty shop work, the theme was clearly the loss of public space. We wanted to create a vision that might provoke.

Gareth: An important inspiration and resource in the making of SIU was the book, '[Blueprint for a Revolution](#)' an illustrated guide to changing the world through non-violent means by Srdja Popovic.

Fern: I'm interested in the fact that you used text and speech in Smash It Up, I'd not really seen that in any of your earlier work – you mainly used silence or sang songs.

Gareth: It felt that we had finally earned the right to speak. But then silence is still an important part of what we do. All the 'Actions' as part of SIU are done in silence. Silence becomes a political act. The image, the symbol, the act is what becomes important. There's also a ritual aspect to our silence.

After an intensive period of research and development, they'd found the 'cultural conservationist' characters, their navy boiler-suit and fluorescent jacket uniform and created a 'pilot' show to be premiered at Newport's Riverfront Theatre.

Gareth: SIU is about the history of destruction. It's a 'destructive plea for some cultural conservatism'. There was something about people seeing the digger destroying the mural that people understood. You know when you see something important being destroyed, you feel aggrieved. But what about the erosion and destruction of other things – rights, freedom, access to public space, the NHS, the education system? This is not so visible so people care about it less. The public realm is being eroded but we don't see the bulldozer. There is no anger.

Marega: We learned from our time in the empty shops of Newport that artists can have open conversations. Art is the medium of connecting people and things.

[SIU](#) is the story of something very local but it's happening everywhere... We wondered if it would translate to other places so we took it to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival – people really got it... We were shortlisted for the Amnesty Freedom of Expression Award.

The Newport Rising was the last large-scale armed rebellion against authority in Great Britain, and one of the largest civil massacres committed by the British government in the 19th century, when, on 4 November 1839, somewhere between 1,000 and 5,000 Chartist sympathisers, led by John Frost, marched on the town of Newport, Monmouthshire. The men, including many coal-miners, most with home-made arms, were intent on liberating fellow Chartists who were reported to have been taken prisoner in the town's Westgate Hotel. About 22 demonstrators were killed when troops opened fire on them. The leaders of the rebellion were convicted of high treason and were sentenced to a traitor's death. The sentence was later commuted to transportation for life. [More info](#)



Bound Detained (SIU Action), Clarks/Bosch, image: Andrew Rock



This is Public, Clarks/Bosch, image: Andrew Rock

THE ACTIONS

'Public Interventions' or 'Actions' (what mentor André Stitt calls AKSHUNS) were a crucial part of the research and development for Smash It Up, but they were soon to become as important as the show itself. They became mini-performances, side-shows and ritualized actions as well as being fantastic marketing opportunities for the tour itself when documented and released through social media as impactful short films.

Marega: As part of the Actions, we ask: "what do we need to draw people's attention to?"

Gareth: We would wrap up public monuments in tape and mark them 'under threat'. Public spaces are restricted and controlled now. This is an infringement of human rights. It wasn't always like this. But for young people, there's a feeling that things have always been like this and always will be. There's no alternative. There is something about the creative mind that is also under threat.

Marega: One of the first Actions was in Cwmbran Shopping Centre called 'Imagining a Better Future'. We stood there in silence doing just that – imagining a better future... After six minutes the rapid response team were called. They told us we would have to go to the manager's office. We refused. After twenty minutes, the management came to us. They asked us what we thought we were doing. We said we were imagining a better future. They started giving us their sales pitch for the town...

We did another action in Newport Kingsway Shopping Centre. They didn't like that. We carried an 8ft x 4ft board with 'THIS IS PRIVATE' written on it. Bosch used this footage for the films they made for SIU.

Gareth: Then there was the time we organised an Action during the [NATO Summit](#) just outside Newport in 2014. There were 9,500 police drafted in, so security was tight. We were detained. We stayed silent. The brief for our action was in my pocket (we write down instructions for each one we do) – it was a three-





page 'manifesto' which the detaining officer ending up reading over the phone to his superior.

Marega: We knew we had to do something to mark the final opening of the new [Friar's Walk Shopping Centre](#) in Newport on 12th November 2015 - built in part with £90 million of council money lent to the property developers to ensure it opened on time. This was what the Chartist mural had been knocked down to build. The three of us chained ourselves together and shuffled along holding blue plastic bags. The old people said: "look here comes the chain gang!".

Private Development often creates problems, large areas of a town become out of bounds, big open spaces are often boarded-up or left for months or even years between demolishing and re-building. Pedestrians have to find new routes through, it's especially hard for pushchairs and the less mobile.

The Actions effectively publicise the show but each becomes a min-protest/ artwork in itself.

Marega: In Edinburgh, we were doing slow single-file walking holding signs, one side with SIU the other

side blank, a big red rectangle. Carrying a placard usually means you're either selling or protesting. We need to protect that empty space we're carrying on the card - for colour, for thought, for art. You do feel exposed. When people ask us/ me (the one woman in the line-up) what we're doing, as we're doing it in silence, I mostly don't answer. I've been called 'bitch' or 'arrogant cow'. You have to grow an extra thick skin. The uniform helps. It helps you strip away parts of yourself.

We're mostly not using any words. We're not dictating. We don't want to tell them what to think. We want to give people time and space to reflect, interpret the image and come up with their own narrative. As soon as we put the uniform on and leave the house we are in role - walking in unison, not talking, single file. I suppose it's like dance, a body moving in space, a choreography.. It's about making public spaces your playground.

Gareth: We've been involved in Actions as part of the Anti-Austerity March and recently in [Aberystwyth](#) highlighting the fact the council are now lifting restrictions on development in the town paving the

way to chain coffee shops which put the independents out of business.

Marega: For the [Cardiff Without Culture](#) march, we made a 'second line', holding umbrellas like in traditional New Orleans funerals.

Gareth: Doing the show in Edinburgh has now led to conversations with people in Leeds, Liverpool and London around the privatisation of space. The proposed [Garden Bridge](#) in London is an instance of this kind of thing - being built with public money but it will in effect be another controlled, privatised zone.

Fern: And how has this work changed you? What has it given you?

Marega: A conversation, a connection. I love that I can bump into such a wide range of people in Newport now and have a conversation - and that this happened through an art project. That's a joy, a brilliant pay-off.

Fern: And what now, what's next?

Marega: There's a few things bubbling up that we're interested in doing. It feels important to make work reflecting what's on our doorstep - the arms trade, the drugs

trade... We scratched the surface on both of these already. But maybe we will return to a smaller 'feeder' project... It's important when I'm drawing to go back to the beginning - just to work again with a pencil or charcoal. I always need to find the ground again - see who's around me on the ground. It's a physical thing like earthing myself. I'll probably need to go on a big walk through Newport again...

Gareth: Smash It Up is the beginning of a movement, the start of a campaign. It's not an ending.

ORIEL WRECSAM & THE SHEPHERD'S HUT



Gimme Shelter, artist & image: Antonia Dewhurst

To tell the story of Oriel Wrecsam (OW) and The Shepherds Hut I spoke to six people: Steffan Jones-Hughes, Arts Manager, Wrexham County Borough Council, Director of Programme at OW, and visual artist; Jo Marsh, Learning & Engagement Officer, also a practicing artist; Kristian Lozstyn, young people's mentor for the Caia Park STARS Project; commissioned artist Antonia Dewhurst; and Grant and Tash two of the young volunteers helping her to build the Shepherds Hut.



Creative Wrexham has arrived!

The arts in Wrexham have seen significant change over the past five years. There has been a shift away from providing a leisure service to becoming a key driver for economic development within the town and wider country.

The aims of our project are:

- To develop an arts and cultural hub with the presentation of visual arts at its heart.
- Social and Economic regeneration of Wrexham
- Aiding and developing community cohesion
- Improving health and well being of local residents
- Increasing participation
- Developing audiences
- Expanding cultural offer
- Contributing to economic regeneration

('Programme Strands' OW Publication)

OW's commissioning, of Antonia Dewhurst's Shepherd's Hut, demonstrates the team's commitment to a particular type of 'socially engaged' arts practice. It is representative of the type of projects they have developed to help achieve the aims set out above.

OW & CREATIVE WREXHAM

OW's original location was in the town's Public Library. It is now 'in transition' in the city centre before moving to a new permanent home. Work has been carried out to produce a business plan and detailed designs for a new £4.3 million Arts and Cultural Space for Wrexham, due to open in Spring 2018 on the site of the People's Market.

OW sees the move as an opportunity to actively engage with the town in a different way. This chimes with a commitment to a more socially engaged kind of art by Steffan and the rest of the OW team. To support this, a number of innovative ['strands' of work and off-site projects](#) have been developed by Jo Marsh, which see the whole town as OW's new, temporary gallery space. OW currently occupies two empty shop units in the town centre supported by the County Borough Council, Welsh Government's [Vibrant and Viable Places Programme](#) and project funding from the Arts Council of Wales.

I asked Steffan how different it felt being in a shop in the town centre as opposed to being based in the library.





Steffan: A very specific audience visits a library. I love being in an empty shop in this street. You're suddenly part of the everyday. We are in the middle of a karaoke bar, a gym, a Polish supermarket and a Welsh language community pub. It is a 'failing street' since TJ Hughes, the big sports shop opposite closed (which used to provide a walkway through to another part of town). So people don't generally come down this street anymore.

I know Wrexham. It's changed a lot in the past five years. There's a 'super-prison' due to open in 2017... there are 52 languages now spoken in the town. This is the biggest town in North Wales and there are now no Arts Council Revenue Funded Clients here. There's a big potential for audiences here and to experiment with working with specific communities. I am devoted to making things happen. Our art is all about breaking down social barriers. It's about re-imagining Wrexham.

Steffan has been in post since 2012 and is responsible for developing the vision for 'Creative Wrexham'. Before this, he was involved in many artist led regeneration projects elsewhere and was involved in supporting 'The Arthouse' in Wakefield.

Steffan: After having gone to meetings with the local council and being dismissed for saying, "art is a key driver for economic development", I am now having this phrase quoted back at me. It can become just a soundbite but I know it to be true.

With regeneration funding, art can still often be seen as just an 'add on'. But this is very different to the old way of 'doing community engagement' – where the participation aspect was often more about being able to lever funding. This is about doing so much more than 'bringing an artist in'.

Fern: Is the town ready for 'Creative Wrexham'?

Steffan: One town councillor was [reported as saying](#) that there was no support locally for the proposed cultural hub, saying "let's face it, Wrexham is a pie and chips town". We are what we are and we can be so much more if we embrace creativity. I think you can have art and pie and chips. Wrexham is a creative town. It is the home of the industrial revolution, of the first paper banknotes. It's was a making, manufacturing and craft skills town.

Steffan and his team have been actively involved in a consultation with local residents about what form of arts provision people wanted in the town. They created a forum in the town centre for dialogue. Innovative 'Art Strands' such as 'Art Vend' and 'I Know You, You Can Come With Me', also brought art closer and made it more visible to the townspeople.



PERICLO, image: Dewi Lloyd

Jo Marsh, Learning & Engagement Officer told me more about the 'Art Strands,' and why they are so important, especially in this transitional time for OW.

Jo: It's about having an expanded definition of the arts. This feels pioneering for Wrexham. With socially engaged practice it's not about 'dumbing down' or just about the creation of an object - the process and the context of the art are important.

As we are in one of the '[Fusion](#)' pilot areas looking at tackling poverty through culture, this has also given us a platform to do the evaluation and monitoring work. We've been measuring the impact of our projects and we really have evidence of if it's working or not. This has helped us draw attention to the work of OW. It's really useful to develop a tangible way to measure impact and develop a strong case for what you are doing. But it's important to keep asking - "how do we keep the arts in focus?" - when we are also satisfying

so many other criterias. The 'Strands' are contemporary arts projects which involve learning practical skills within a visual arts context

Steffan: In two years time, we hope to be opening the doors of a bigger development in the town centre, 'OW: The People's Market'. It's being designed with sustainability in mind. It will have a cinema, café, market, performance space and galleries... If you don't do anything with people, it's hard to justify having this space. [As Jo said] It's not about

dumbing down, but people need to experience art, not learn just how to understand it with endless panels of text which just "explain an exhibition".

Jo: Making art which is relevant to people is so embedded in the vision for Oriel Wrexham.

Fern: Steffan, how would you, as Director of Programme at OW describe your role and how important is it that you are a practicing artist?

Steffan: I would call myself an 'instigator'. This job is an extension of my practice. It's a vocation. My work-life is so much about engagement. The philosophy behind what we do is 'collaboration in practice'. It can be exhausting, but I love giving other artists opportunities. We are all artists on the team here. This is instrumental in the way we work and develop projects and partnerships. We are all on the same journey.

Mentoring and supporting students and emerging artists seems to be an important part of what happens at OW. Jo herself was mentored by Steffan as part of her own project [Wanderbox](#).

Steffan: We also need to be mindful about working with new and younger artists. We have a space called 'Risk & Experimentation'(PERICLO) – this is important for us. We don't just want to work with tried and tested 'flavour of the month artists', this can become a bit of a trap.

CAIA PARK & THE SHEPHERDS HUT PROJECT

Fern: Can you tell me about how you formed the connection with Caia Park?

Steffan: We made a connection with Caia Park [originally called Queens Park] on one of our earlier projects. Caia Park is one of the largest social housing sites in Europe – and the largest in Wales. The project began with a programme of drawing workshops we organised there.

There are 2000 houses in Caia Park and 12,000 people. According to the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, the [Caia Park](#) and Queensway wards are two of the 100 most deprived areas in Wales.

Jo: We knew we wanted to do some work at Caia Park. The drawing workshops were 'firing a shot in the air' to see who was around.

Steffan: We hosted the space and provided the materials and an artist to lead the workshops. Whilst running the project, we found that many of the residents of Caia Park rarely leave the estate so we decided to take them out to do art field trips. To show them some of the important tourist destinations in the county

Jo: This became the '[Make Trips](#)'. We took participants out in a minibus to draw in different places around the county. The group went on to become 'Oriel Crafters'. One of the participants is now leading the group and it's a self-sustaining, self-

organising project. The Caia Park connection to the Shepherd's Hut project started here.

Fern: How did you choose which artist you wanted to work with on the Shepherd's Hut project?

Steffan: Antonia Dewhurst was one of the artists whose work most impressed me during the selection of the Lle Celf, Eisteddfod in 2011.

Antonia is known for her fascination for shelter and structures. Her work, '[Gimme Shelter](#)' was selected for the National Eisteddfod, presented in an expanded format, for Artisterium IV in Tbilisi and again, in 2012, at Oriel Davies's Testbed gallery in Newtown. After 'Gimme Shelter' she decided "to build a house in one night" - '[Ty Unnos](#)' referring to the 19th century Welsh tradition responding to the Enclosure Acts, whereby if a house was started at sunset, built, with smoke coming out of it by sunrise, the structure and it's inhabitants were allowed to remain. Her work stepped up a scale, though her preoccupation with temporary shelters remained...



Gimme Shelter, artist & image: Antonia Dewhurst



Gimme Shelter, artist & image: Antonia Dewhurst



“BUILDING
STRUCTURES IS A
HUMAN IMPERATIVE”

Antonia: Each of the huts was a self-portrait...a symbol of the fragility of 'civilised society'...a metaphor for the human condition. To me they give a sense of the isolation of life in the 21st century.

For *Gimme Shelter*, Antonia created a series of micro-structures: each a 'Ty Unnos' or 'One Night Home'. Antonia first collaborated with OW designing a number of 'kit huts' for the collaborative gifting project, ['1 Know You, You Can Come With Me'](#) inviting people to make their own miniature hut.

For this current project, Antonia was given a brief by Steffan to produce a 'temporary art space that could be moved'. As the 'temporary art space', Antonia decided to build a *Shepherd's Hut*.

Antonia: Building structures is a human imperative. Before food and water we need shelter. I love the size. It's the length of a shepherd. It's a den, a human-sized snail shell. I thought...I would love to build one!

However OW didn't just want Antonia to build a temporary art space alone in her studio, but wanted her to build it collaboratively with people from the Caia Park estate.

Antonia: To work communally wasn't my primary objective, but it was clear from the word go that this was important for Oriel Wrecsam.



Shepherds Hut, artist & image: Antonia Dewhurst



Shepherds Hut, artist & image: Antonia Dewhurst

It wasn't my driving force, as I'm naturally quite shy, but I've grown to love it.

Steffan: It feels important that the hut is being made there [at Caia Park]. There's a woodworking shop on site. A mixture of volunteers and young people are working on it. It's a real partnership. We instigated it but it couldn't have happened without them. They feel an ownership of it. It's theirs...

Antonia is working with volunteers from the woodwork workshop and young people involved in the [STARS](#) project which supports young people into employment, education and training.

Jo: However, when making relationships between projects, you do need a key person.

That 'key person' was Kristian Lozstyn, young people's mentor for STARS.

Fern: Why were you interested in this particular project?

Kristian: All the classic signs of social and economic problems are here (at Caia Park). We feel so privileged to have this project. The state and the charity agenda are all about getting a job. It felt really important that this was an art project and not just a skills project. The narrative that 'sells' those more typical projects to the community can instantly put barriers

up. If you go into the community and tell them "we've got you an up-skilling project" we hear "ah Jeez, another one, another one of those things to help you get a job, when there aren't any jobs". We hear that time and again. In an art project the vocabulary is different from those generic state-sponsored drives. An artist can do something a community engagement person could never do. We can say "we are building a Shepherd's Hut. It's going to be awesome, it's going to be fun, it's going to be used by the community, there's going to be a legacy..."

Antonia: Art has got a lot to teach us. It gives you a different perspective. It's about being playful and problem solving. Art does everything that people do. It educates, it activates. 'Noticing' is a crucial part of being an artist - "just look at the world from here" - whether that is from a great mountaintop or a little hillock.

Grant: This is a good piece of work in my mind. I've done this as an art piece. It's got character.



Shepherds Hut, artist & image: Antonia Dewhurst

Kristian: Even if it just gets people thinking outside the box, it could spark some other things. There's a lot of [sheep art-pieces](#) around in Wrexham [another OW project]. People are starting to say: "wow what's all this art stuff happening?"

Fern: How important has the collaborative aspect been on the project?

Kristian: We've seen that collaboration is more powerful when it comes to the design and creative elements. Toni has said: "ah, I'm really glad you made me do it this way!" Putting our minds and skills together, we've found that we've got so much more potential.

We've built some fantastic relationships. We struggle to

have a catalyst to bring people into community that is fun, interesting, vibrant and that nobody is in it for ulterior motives. There are thousands of people here who have got neighbours who they've never said hello to. The generic services lack certain things and the agendas of a lot of organisations just push people away... "we want to stop anti-social behavior, we want you to get your housing sorted, we want to get you into a job"... Life is serious, it's challenging, it's difficult. The Shepherd's Hut project has been fun and relaxing and disciplined and focused! I hope we're going to see more of this approach where art benefits the community socially and even politically.

Tash: I've learned a lot since I've known Toni. It's a brilliant scheme. Instead of saying you can't do this or that, they're all understanding and they help me, they've worked with me. It gives me hope.

Steffan: The community has really embraced the project and have also used it in unusual ways - like turning it into a Santa's Grotto last Christmas! We are now in the 22nd week of the project. It will eventually come into the town centre and become an art-work in it's own right - a part of our permanent 'collection'.

When finished the Shepherd's Hut will be installed in OW's new arts and cultural space in the People's Market becoming a focus for further curated activity.

Antonia: It will be the residue, a lasting memento of a protracted performance.

Fern: What do you think the Shepherd's Hut will do for Wrexham?

Kristian: It can show people there is another way. Life isn't just about work. This will be used as an art space for young people, old people - whoever. It's special for people like Grant here who wants to become a joiner. It's not just about putting up four walls. He's doing some art as well. That's really special. There's so much more to life than just getting a job, there's beauty out there, there's wonder, there's creativity...

Grant: It shows people that life isn't all about 'anti-social behaviour' and that without any grades you can still put something into the community.

The Shepherd's Hut and Antonia's temporary structures serve as an important reminder, not just of

the importance of a socially engaged collaborative art practice but of an uncertain future. Not just for those living in 'communities first' areas but for all of us.

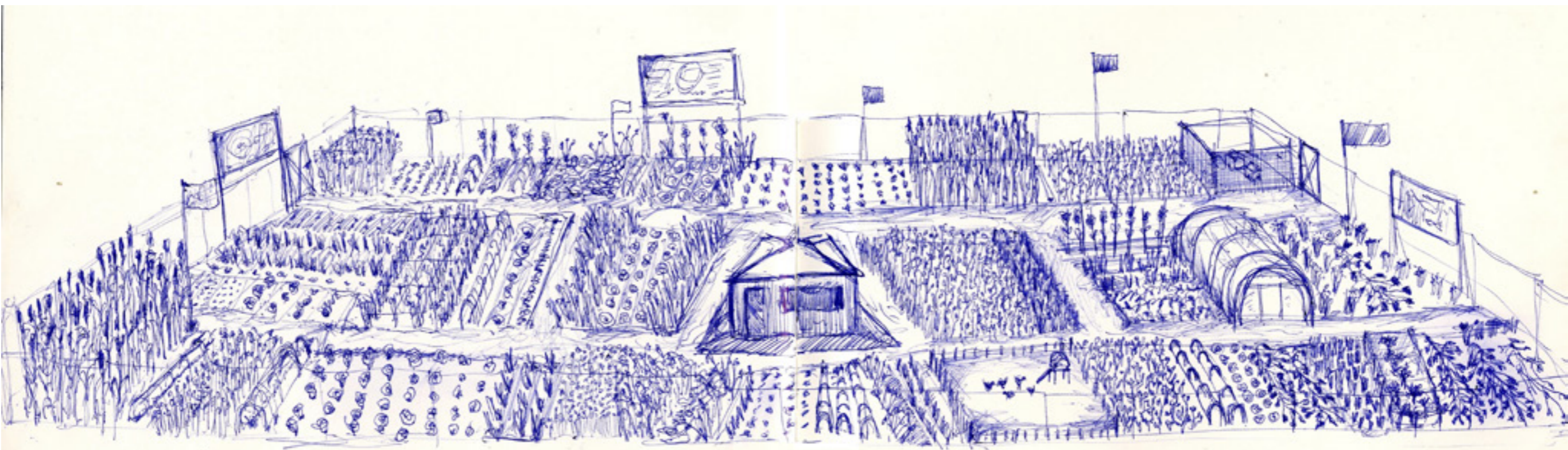
Antonia: We've got to learn how to do things differently. We are going to have to learn how to repair, to live modestly, to live frugally. Things will change. I was born in 1954, the year that rationing finished. We've got a real downer on austerity. I think our future is going to be austere. The challenge is a real one. We will have to learn this - how to build against the clock and the weather. We are all builders...



Shepherds Hut, artist & image: Antonia Dewhurst

VETCH VEG

To tell the story of Vetch Veg, I spoke to three people: the artist Owen Griffiths responsible for the project; another artist, Marc Rees, who commissioned him to do it and Nathalie Camus, Portfolio Manager at the Arts Council of Wales with responsibility for Regeneration, Sustainability, and Art in the Public Realm.



Biro sketch Vetch Veg, artist & image: Owen Griffiths

THE CULTURAL OLYMPIAD & LOCAL CONNECTIONS



Vetch Veg was part of the UK wide [Cultural Olympiad](#) in 2012: 'Artists Taking the Lead' – "the largest cultural programme of any Olympic and Paralympic Games". Marc Rees was one of twelve artists throughout the UK selected to 'take the lead' in Wales, with his massively ambitious Adain Avion project, co-produced by the Taliesin Arts Centre and funded by the National Lottery through the Arts Council of Wales. He collaborated with a number of key artists to create 150 events in Ebbw Vale, Llandudno, Llandow and Swansea. Adain Avion was the focus of these events – a mobile arts space, social sculpture and travelling time capsule created from the recycled and transformed fuselage of an abandoned DC9 aeroplane by Spanish sculptor Eduardo Cajal. Vetch Veg was one of the highlights of the Swansea programme, intending to transform a section of the iconic former home of Swansea City Football Club, The Vetch, (which if still standing, would

have celebrated its centenary in 2012), into a temporary vegetable garden with members of the local community over one growing season. This 'social artwork' culminated in a flower and produce show held around [Avion's](#) nesting site in front of the Waterfront Museum, and a harvest supper for the local residents aboard the plane.

Fern: So, Vetch Veg was commissioned from one artist: Owen Griffiths, by another artist: Marc Rees. I know that both of you are Swansea born and bred, and that when it happened, it was the most ambitious project of either of your careers to date. Tell me how it all started...

Vetch Veg is a community Vegetable garden created in 2012 - a collaboration between residents of the Sandfields in Swansea, South Wales and the artist Owen Griffiths. Together they created an urban utopia in the centre of the city on the historic ground of the Vetch football field. The project was commissioned by Marc Rees and managed by Taliesin Arts Centre in partnership with Glynn Vivian Art Gallery, Swansea Environmental Forum and the City and County of Swansea. [More info](#)



The Vetch, image: Warren Orchard

The Vetch field was the former home of the Swans football team and the stadium a major architectural and cultural icon in the city centre. Since the last game in 2005 the stadium had been empty and the home of the club was relocated to Landore, just outside the city. [The Vetch](#) is situated in the Sandfields, an area which is so called because it is like an extension of the beach. A large community comprising of housing, community centers, schools, a mosque, churches, a crown court, a prison, territorial army base and a salvation army center. It is also in the heart of the city.

The Vetch was a sacred space for fans and was closely connected to the communities' identity. Since the last game the stadium was allowed to deteriorate and crumble. It was a huge piece of land surrounded by walls, whose giant gates which rusted and remained locked. The Vetch site became a symbol of the financial crisis and of poor management and communication and a place which still echoed with fans that once filled its stands.

The community became disconnected and despondent about the lack of development and action with the site; its future, and the ideas for the stadium's redevelopment put forward by investors and local authority. After living with the Vetch in the centre of their community and enduring years of football riots, street fights, as well as momentous wins, huge concerts, police on horse back charging down the small streets, massive crowds and the eventual decline of the stadium, it was decided by the City and County that the grounds be demolished and a temporary green space be created, in order to make the land more attractive for re-sale. Vetch Veg and Adain Avion, Cultural Olympiad Wales together with Taliesin Arts Centre were given permission by Swansea City Council to have a temporary licence on 2,500 square meters of the overall site to engage the local community in the project, which was to be a temporary use of the land, lasting until August 2012.

Marc: Vetch Veg wouldn't have happened without Adain Avion and the funding and opportunity it provided. The framework of the Olympics provided this – enabling Owen to do a crazy project he had always wanted to do. Trust is a big ingredient in the success of a project like this. It was extremely important to me that the idea came from a collaboration between two passionate artists, both of whose hometown is Swansea and one who is living within the square mile of the project.

Fern: Can you tell me what being an artist means to you? What kind of artist are you?

Owen: I'm an artist who works within the social realm, investigating space and setting up conversations or interventions – most of my work tends to be a collaboration in some sense, I seek those opportunities out. I'm passionate about creating spaces for dialogue and transformation. 'Artist' is an enabling title – it means I can trespass into places I wouldn't ordinarily be allowed, like a prison or an institution. Vetch Veg had always been a dream of mine, it had been at the back of my mind for years.

Marc: I think of myself as an archeologist. I mix fact and fiction. I'm interested in layering, in joining up objects (and people)...

Owen: The artist can be a facilitator of conversations and a change-maker.

Marc: When I got the 'Artists Taking the Lead' commission I knew I wanted to work with Owen. Working with someone else introduces a

whole other potential - that's the point of collaboration.

Owen: I'm really interested in finding out how you fix or address issues and problems through a creative process. We spoke to the council about this as an art project – they were immediately out of their comfort zone but because it was labelled as 'Cultural Olympiad' we were able to explore the idea under a temporary usage... We of course subverted that, which was part of the plan. They thought it would be a 'public art piece' lasting for one year. In this way Vetch Veg always was an 'official' and an 'unofficial' project. [To date in 2016, Vetch Veg is still going strong].

Marc: The fact that this was a 'Cultural Olympiad' project gave us a way in to talk to Swansea Council. The council were up for it immediately. If you have passion, you can convince anybody to do anything – we could confidently say: "this is going to be good for you". The Vetch was going to be knocked down anyway. There was a lot of local discontent about this. Not all of them were in favor though. One prominent councillor wanted a community centre to be built on the land instead. But we persuaded them. Initially they were going to build homes there too. Sandfields is a very diverse and multi-cultural area including large Chinese, student and Bangladeshi communities and it's one without any green space.

Owen: Many people including the council were sceptical of the idea and the invitation to the community to create the project, they were

supportive but they also doubted anyone would be interested. A crucial part of its success was securing supportive local partners, including Adain Avion co-producer, Sybil Crouch, director of Taliesin Arts Centre (She was also the local councillor for the area and had the remit for sustainability in Swansea City Council at the time.) Sybil and her team at Taliesin played a huge role in realising the project and supporting it throughout and beyond the Cultural Olympiad project. The project kept growing in scale beyond our expectations and we were soon overwhelmed with interest and support as well as logistics of managing such a space. It literally became my life for two years. Eventually Carys Shannon, a Creative Producer and artist, came to help us and managed a lot of the engagement work alongside me, helping us realise the capacity and scope of the project which became, and remains a key social green space in the centre of the city. Also essential to Vetch Veg's success was the support of Deb Hill, leader of the Nature Conservation Team at Swansea Council.

Largely thanks to Deb's work and her small committed team, Swansea has a long history of championing biodiversity, ecological education and community engagement – Swansea, being the home of Wales' first Environment Centre. The presence of these partnerships and active links with existing community groups enabled Vetch Veg to do an enormous amount in very little time – creating a work of art with an enduring legacy and a local growing project in just one season...

Fern: Can you tell me a bit more about your arts practice?

Owen: I've always been interested in a connection to social justice and sense of place through a process-based practice - exposing the politics of communities or of a connection and interaction with landscape. When I was in school, I wanted to be something like a cross between an artist, a teacher, and a social worker. When I was studying art at Oxford Brookes University I had an allotment but hated going to it on my own. I wanted it to be a social space doing the weeding with the kettle on. I didn't spend much time in the studio – I had to force myself to go there – everyone was always working in their individual spaces so with Swansea based artists and fellow Brookes students Fern Thomas and Adele Vye we started to create events or collaborations based within a social territory, which developed further when we returned to Wales. I was interested in finding a balance between a workspace, creative space, living and making space but didn't know how to achieve this.

I've been inspired by examples of urban land use ideas from places like Berlin, Copenhagen, from allotments and squats and the writings of anarchist planners like Colin Ward, radical architects like Walter Segal and public space projects like Park Fiction in Hamburg. The making of a garden or green space as a community (like Vetch Veg) was / is not a new thing invented by socially engaged practitioners or artists, it's a civic and social activity, its ancient, and I'm not claiming this as an artwork. Art and the process



Vetch Veg Cafe, artist & image: Owen Griffiths



Vetch Veg Cafe, artist & image: Owen Griffiths



of commissioning public artwork as a dialogue can enable so much – if the conditions are right. This kind of practice can create a cultural shift and drives regeneration; something to be both aware of and to use for good purpose.

Marc: The Vetch was an iconic football ground, named after a common plant – a member of the legume family. It felt appropriate that it should be turned into a growing space once it no longer functioned as a football ground. Actually allotments originally stood upon the site before it became the home and hallowed turf of the local team, 'The Swans'. We were in a way returning it to its original function – a green space, a garden, a place of growth and transformation.

Owen: A garden is an amazing space, a studio enabling creativity to flourish. This had always been a dream project of mine, it had been at the back of my mind for years. Vetch Veg was very specific to 'place'. When asked: "where do you come from?" – as community projects are sometimes perceived to be shipped in by outsiders – I was able to say that I came from Swansea. Living locally and being able to see the space from my bedroom window felt important. I can look out of the window and still see it now.

Vetch Veg consists of 110 growing beds, polytunnels, built and gardened by over 150 people from the community of Sandfields. It in effect became an ["urban utopia in the middle of the city"](#).

Owen: Everyone brought their skills and knowledge, we had chicken farmers, gardeners, cooks and carpenters as well as people who had never built or grown anything before all working together. When you gather a large group of people to work on a communal endeavor, the skills and experiences of that group can really be amplified and actioned, as a result things get resolved and can happen quickly.

Fern: Did people know that you are an artist and this was an art project and not just, say a community garden?

Owen: I was just doing everything that needed doing – organising timber, building beds, talking to people, collecting manure and seaweed for compost, organising beekeeping and bread oven building courses. The other people involved didn't have difficulty seeing it as an art project. Actually the biggest difficulty was from those in the 'art world' and the media. Vetch Veg was an art piece about access to land and disconnection to civic space and working together. We

have an archaic attitude to access and the importance of green and public space in Swansea and across the UK.

Marc: Some people from Sandfields didn't know or care it was an art project. Others were aware that Owen was an artist and that this was something to do with 'Culture' and the 'Olympics'. The project was transformative. It broke down barriers. People were cooking and eating as well as growing together. It actually became an open-air community centre.

Owen: There's been a real transformation in Sandfields. There was a lot of social isolation even though there's a big density of housing. Vetch Veg helped create a 'WE'... We heard countless versions of the story – "we were living next door to people and never spoke to them until we saw them at Vetch Veg". The art, the rhythms of food growing – the watering, planting, weeding enabled social relationships to develop. When you are involved in a practical framework of something like creating a garden together it breaks down social and racial barriers, there's a need to cooperate and co-work in a new context – which we were the authors of.

Fern: Nathalie, can you tell me what significance this project had for you

in terms of your personal views and also as someone working in a senior position at the Arts Council of Wales?

Nathalie: People sometimes ask: "where is the art?" in projects like this. It is not always present in a recognised traditional form. But it was present in Vetch Veg – it wasn't just an allotment. There was a certain aesthetic about it that was integral. It was constructed in a particular way with a specific attention to detail to how people circulated. The warmth of creation was at the heart of it. You could see it in how people would light up when they talked about it.

Socially engaged practice is not new, but something about Vetch Veg has now become a recognized model, anchoring the notion of art and the public realm firmly in the Welsh psyche. This kind of practice exists between art and architecture, it transcends each discipline. At the heart of it was a curiosity about how people come together and navigated within spaces. It subverted the idea of architecture. People normally think architecture is about buildings. Vetch Veg married art practice with an understanding of regeneration and community engagement.



~~~~~  
"IT BROKE DOWN  
BARRIERS. PEOPLE  
WERE COOKING AND  
EATING AS WELL AS  
GROWING TOGETHER"  
~~~~~

LEGACY & LEARNING



Vetch Veg Cafe, artist & image: Owen Griffiths

Owen: It took three years from it's conception to me leaving the project. It's still ongoing. Its sustainability is its legacy. That's sustainability – it doesn't need an artist to service it in the long run. It 'washes it's own face'.

Marc: Vetch Veg is the most successful Adain Avion project in terms of the legacy it created. The Taliesin are still involved but it's now run entirely by the local community.

Owen: To mark the end of my association with Vetch Veg we organised the [Sandfields Festival of Ideas](#). This was part of the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery's move offsite whilst its refurbishment was taking place, this was curated by Karen MacKinnon. It was essentially a festival in which we built a shed which was also a library, with yoga, pizza making, talks, films, gigs, a beer tent and an artist in residence. It was an amazing event. We hosted talks from Nina Pope from a great garden project in London 'What Will The Harvest Be?', Alistair Hudson of Grizedale Arts (now Director of MIMA), the artist Shimabuku and with Peter Finnemore as artist in residence and many more.



“A GARDEN IS AN
AMAZING SPACE, A
STUDIO ENABLING
CREATIVITY TO
FLOURISH”



Fern: What has happened directly or indirectly as a result of Vetch Veg?

Owen: I think Vetch Veg influenced the way the site was going to be built on in the future. Part of the green space (adjacent to Vetch Veg) was sold to a housing association to build sheltered housing. Out of it also came 'Grow Local' a local authority supported scheme developed by Sybil in her role as local councillor, giving grants to communities growing their own food. How do we make sure arts projects live beyond their funded cycle and become sustainable systems when they can? How can we influence planners and politicians in the longer term? These are questions I'm really interested in. But I didn't have a ten year plan! Its also still there, winning sustainability awards, providing a space for collaboration, as well as appearing on BBC Countryfile (!) and many other things, but most importantly many of the same people and new members continue to work together there. I'll always be hugely grateful for the opportunity and the experience of working with the amazing people we did during those 2-3 years.

Fern: How was it for you to finish working on the project?

Owen: I had to leave. It wouldn't work with me there driving it all the time. It had to be handed over. Leaving was incredibly emotional. I was there every single day for two years. Every time I talk about Vetch Veg (and I still get asked to talk about it) I learn more about the process and myself. I worked really closely with some of the gardeners in particular, you become friends and complex relationships emerge, as co-authors as colleagues. I was over-invested in many ways but I didn't know any better, it's a very familiar space in my imagination but I don't go there often anymore. It has its own life now.

Fern: Is Vetch Veg still a work of art now you've left?

Owen: It doesn't have to be called art anymore – or ever. We never insisted on that.

Fern: What did you learn from the project?

Owen: It changed my life. It will always be in my consciousness. Before Vetch Veg I was doing lots of different things but struggling to bring them together into a coherent form or practice. Vetch Veg helped me do this – I was very naïve. It was a kind of creative apprenticeship. I was trying things out. I've learned a lot about how to do and not do things in future.

Nathalie: Vetch Veg was about the notion of public and private space and the reusing of space in an urban context. It didn't start as a regeneration project. But artists have a very different way of approaching problems and are often attuned to subtleties that sometimes get missed by urban planners and more formal regeneration projects. There is democracy and dialogue in the way an artist gets to work. Once private developers get to work, access is cut off and the space closes down. When artists are involved there is something about the quality of engagement with a community which is meaningful and sustained beyond the actual programme.

Grow Local is about encouraging our communities to grow their own food by funding a range of community-based growing projects with the aim of improving access to fresh fruit and vegetables throughout the city.

[More info](#)



“THERE IS
DEMOCRACY AND
DIALOGUE IN THE
WAY ARTISTS GET TO
WORK”



Vetch Veg, artist & image: Owen Griffiths

Nathalie: For me, Vetch Veg was about regaining citizenship. It mirrored very much how the Arts Council of Wales were beginning, post-restructure, to look at it's own approach to enterprise, the built environment, sustainability, regeneration and the public realm. The moment was right for us to look at how public art was sited. We wanted to shift the thinking around regeneration and community art. We felt that we wanted to begin to invest our funds more into this particular way of working. There is a lot of learning to be done – not least in how we work in partnership with artists and other organisations or sectors.

Vetch Veg resonates very much with the Arts Council of Wales' recent strategy, [Ideas: People: Places](#). It's an interesting moment in time. The economic downturn provides us with opportunities as well as challenges. But we do have to be careful that we are not 'doing social engineering'. Participation is vital. We are not doing it to people. People are equal in this process, it's about empowering people and their communities. It's about negotiating that space between spaces, having an openness of vision and breaking down silos. But it's also about us as funders working with the art and not *using* the art, being open to mistakes, risks and learning as well as being accountable.

The creatives who work in this area have or are developing the language of participation as well as art. Within the context of the new [Wellbeing of Future Generations Act](#) this is more relevant than ever and important that artists can participate along with planners and developers.

Fern: And so, what's next?

Owen: There's been a lot of word of mouth from this project. I'm the 'Vetch Veg guy'. This has enabled me to do more projects but sometimes people want the image of something like Vetch Veg rather than the chance to respond to the context and find out what would be needed. This project was definitely not about box-

ticking, or branding something in a particular way. It was specific to the site, time and community and was an opportunity to scale a lot of my ideas up which Marc and Sybil made happen and this has influenced me hugely. I would approach it differently now.

We need to respond specifically to each site and not just parachute an idea in. On a new project I ask: "what's needed, what shall we do?" With every new project I go through a phase where I think: "I'm going to have to move here!" It's very rare now to have a three-year project. My current projects have to happen on a much shorter timescale. The work has to be more time and budget based but I've learned I need to spend most of the time allocated on the preparation - the research and development stage.

We created Vetch Veg in the shadow of Swansea Prison. We had talks with them about doing something similar there. This didn't work out but we are now working at Hillside Secure Unit, in Neath to co-create an edible land system with the young people there.

A further collaboration is also in development for Owen Griffiths and Marc Rees for 2018 involving the Brangwyn Panels of Swansea's Guildhall. More news coming soon...

RESOURCES & FURTHER READING



EMERGENCE & CULTURE SHIFT

www.emergence-uk.org

www.emergence-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/CULTURE-SHIFT-Report.pdf

www.emergence-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/CULTURE-SHIFT-Appendices.pdf

www.emergence-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/CULTURE-SHIFT-Report-Welsh.pdf

MR & MRS CLARK - SMASH IT UP

For more information on Mr & Mrs Clark

www.mrandmrsclark.co.uk

For more information on André Stitt

www.andrestitt.com

For more information on Srdja Popovic

www.blueprintforrevolution.com

ORIEL WRECSAM & THE SHEPHERD'S HUT

For more about Antonia Dewhurst and her work

www.culturehall.com/portfolio.html?artist=antonia_dewhurst

www.fionaowen.wordpress.com/2013/01/30/roots-and-rootlessness-an-interview-with-artist-antonia-dewhurst/

www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/wales/entries/c859e3cd-7b31-3866-afa9-b6190ecf19ab

www.blurb.co.uk/b/1908872-gimme-shelter

Steffan Jones-Hughes website and blog

www.steffanjoneshughes.wordpress.com

Jo Marsh's art project

www.wanderbox.org

About Oriel Wrexham

www.wrexham.gov.uk/english/community/arts_centre/arts_centre_home.htm

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More information on Owen Griffiths

www.aboutreconnection.com

www.vetchveg.co.uk

More information on Marc Rees

www.marcrees.com

www.marcrees.com/projects/adain-avion/

Vetch Veg films

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ARTS COUNCIL OF WALES & WELSH GOVERNMENT

ACW INSPIRE Strategy for Creativity and the Arts in Wales

www.arts.wales/arts-in-wales/inspire

Ideas: People: Places – ACW Arts and Regeneration Strategy

www.arts.wales/77361

WG Regeneration Framework

gov.wales/topics/housing-and-regeneration/regeneration/vibrant-and-viable-places/?lang=en

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FURTHER READING

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